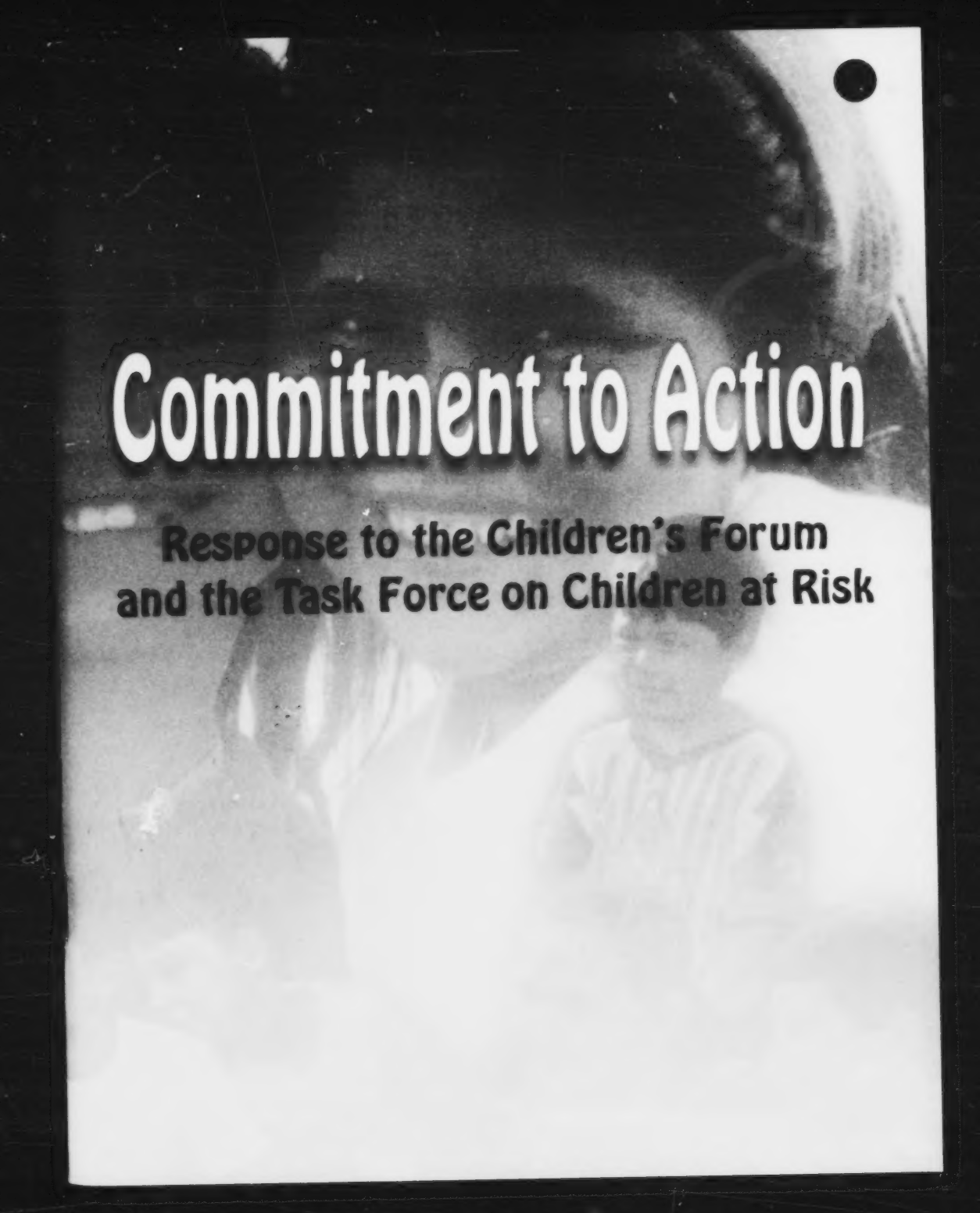

Commitment to Action

Response to the Children's Forum and the Task Force on Children at Risk

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A report back to Albertans

Children's Forum Oct. 5 and 6, 1999

Approximately one year ago, Premier Ralph Klein commissioned Alberta's first Children's Forum – 'First Circle: Uniting for Children'. The forum, chaired by Colleen Klein, was an opportunity for Albertans to provide their views and recommendations on programs for children. Over 1,100 Albertans from across the province gathered in Edmonton to discuss children and youth, identify issues and propose solutions. The Children's Forum Report, a summary of the event, featured 14 themes and over 140 recommendations.

Premier Klein also established the Task Force on Children at Risk after the fatal shooting of a student in Taber, Alberta. The task force's mandate was to identify gaps and barriers in services, identify strategies for meeting the needs of children at risk and develop an action plan for furthering Alberta's goals for children.

Over the past year, the ministries involved in providing services to children and youth have worked together to review the recommendations stemming from both reports and to take action. This booklet provides an overview of many of the initiatives that have been implemented to date in response to the recommendations.

Much progress has been made over the past year but work remains. The Children's Forum report and recommendations will continue to guide decisions made in the future as part of government's ongoing planning. As additional progress is made, Albertans will be kept informed.

Iris Evans

Iris Evans, Minister
Alberta Children's Services

Put Children First

At the Children's Forum, Albertans said children must remain our top priority.

In the last year, the government has:

- Committed to using a "children's filter" as a framework for reviewing all policies, legislation, business plans, and decisions of government
- Increased subsidies for families with low incomes for daycare and family day homes
- Removed provincial income taxes for 200,000 low income families effective Jan. 1, 2001
- United First Nations children living in off-reserve foster homes with permanent on-reserve adoptive parents
- Recognized 16 Alberta children and youth who positively contribute to their families and communities through the first annual Great Kids Awards
- Committed to getting child prostitutes who are victims of sexual abuse off the streets.

"Take responsibility for our children. It is up to all of us to raise healthy children."
– Children's Forum participant

Increase Awareness and Education

Forum participants said there is a need for improved communication on issues related to children's needs.

In the last year, the government has:

- Developed a television campaign to provide messages to youth on drug use and its impact
- Enhanced safety awareness programs for school children
- Undertaken initiatives across Alberta to prevent Fetal Alcohol Syndrome and support those already affected
- Developed prevention resource materials for use by teachers in the classroom
- Enhanced crime prevention and school violence awareness programs for students
- Implemented educational programs related to sexual assault
- Enhanced substance abuse and gambling awareness programs for youth and parents
- Developed programs to help teens make informed choices and to discourage teen pregnancy.

Involve Youth

Youth who attended the forum indicated their desire for a greater voice on issues affecting them.

In the last year, the government has:

- Hosted over 1,000 Alberta youth at seven regional youth forums to discuss issues and solutions on issues affecting youth
- Established a Youth Advisory Panel to provide input to the Ministry of Children's Services through the Youth Secretariat
- Established the Youth Secretariat to advise the Minister of Children's Services on key issues facing youth at risk and ways to address those issues
- Started recruitment for membership on a youth advisory committee to assist in the development of resource materials and strategies for reaching and connecting with high risk youth
- Involved youth in peer education programs
- Initiated planning for the 2001 Children's Forum.

"Let the youth speak out! Hear what they have to say."
– Children's Forum participant

Provide Early Intervention and Healthy Beginnings

Forum attendees indicated a need for improved identification of children at risk in their early years to maximize opportunity for treatment and prevention.

In the last year, the government has:

- Provided additional support to students in Grades 1 and 2 who are experiencing difficulties in developing reading and literacy skills through the Early Literacy Initiative
- Approved funding for 31 existing and new family literacy training and awareness projects through the Family Literacy Project Fund. These projects encourage parents and children to develop their language skills together
- Lifted caps on funding for special needs and English as a Second Language students
- Established Home Visitation programs across the province that enhance healthy births, early childhood development and early supports to parents
- Provided funding for Intensive Behavioural Intervention services for children diagnosed with autism
- Enhanced family violence outreach programs
- Developed programs to support pregnant and parenting teens
- Started a literacy pilot project for at-risk preschoolers
- Made funding available for more than 250 early intervention programs in communities across Alberta, including programs on reserves.

"Earlier intervention for children struggling in school is required."
– Children's Forum participant

Accelerate the Integration of Services for Children

Forum participants indicated that groups need to work together better through increased cooperation, collaboration and sharing of resources to support positive outcomes for children.

In the last year:

- Alberta Learning and Alberta Human Resources and Employment launched the Alberta Youth Employment Strategy to help youth make a successful transition from school to further learning or work
- The Safe and Caring Schools project was implemented. It is a comprehensive violence prevention project involving Alberta Learning, other ministries, schools, the Alberta Teachers' Association and universities to encourage socially responsible and respectful behaviour
- The Youth Connections program was expanded to help link youth with meaningful career choices
- The Student Health Initiative allocated funding to 26 regional partnerships for services including emotional/ behavioural supports, speech language therapy, physical therapy, occupational therapy, respiratory therapy and nursing services.

Address Funding Issues

The need for sustainable funding for community-based agencies, equitable funding among rural and urban areas and appropriate funding levels were identified in the Children's Forum report as priority funding issues.

In the last year, the government has:

- Increased the Children's Services budget by $115,167,000
- Hired 190 additional child welfare staff
- Allocated $8.7 million for increases to contracted agencies and service providers that offer programs to individuals with special needs
- Increased Family and Community Support Services funding by $1 million
- Allocated an additional $48 million over three years for five major children's initiatives to help children at risk:

    1. Protection of Children Involved in Prostitution
    2. Alberta Partnership on Fetal Alcohol Syndrome
    3. Programs for very young children
    4. Community response teams
    5. Supports for youth leaving child welfare.

Enhance the Role of Schools

The Task Force on Children at Risk and the forum report suggest that schools are an obvious location to assist in the identification of children-at-risk, coordination and delivery of services to children.

In the last year, the government has:

- Increased funding to raise the number of hours of kindergarten from 400 to 475
- Enabled police school resource officers to share program information and resource training materials such as school site assessments, crisis management plans and presentations for staff and students
- Opened a new Aboriginal high school, Amiskiwaiy Academy, aimed at better meeting the needs of Aboriginal students
- Provided funding through the Alberta Learning Program Enhancement Project and Enhanced Opportunity Project to help school jurisdictions meet educational needs of students who are socio-economically disadvantaged
- Increased funding for the New Century Schools Plan to address high priority needs for facility modernization projects, and new schools and new portables to accommodate increased enrolment
- Conducted a pilot project to research the effects of class size and related teaching techniques through Edmonton Public Schools in conjunction with Alberta Learning
- Announced a plan to provide high-speed internet access to schools and libraries.

Stimulate Community-Driven Initiatives

Forum participants recognized that services are delivered most effectively at the local level through community driven initiatives.

In the last year, the government has:

- Established Child and Family Services Authorities across the province to deliver services for children and youth based on local priorities
- Formed the Family and Community Support Services Program Advisory Team to provide advice to the provincial FCSS association as well as advice on local programs and provincial policy
- Created collaborative partnerships with agencies, community groups and partnering departments at regional and provincial levels
- Implemented community resource centres as a hub for community-based service including prevention, early intervention and support services for children and families
- Established community advisory councils that provide recommendations on community involvement in the planning and delivery of services to children and families
- Initiated a regional school-based project to support at-risk students and their families
- Provided funding for programs that positively impact youth and families. Some of these programs include leadership skills for Aboriginal youth and helping youth to resolve conflicts.

Address Aboriginal Issues

Forum participants recognized that Aboriginal children face particular challenges as they grow and develop, and Aboriginal communities face unique challenges in supporting and nurturing their children.

In the last year:

- Aboriginal young offenders on probation were able to access an intensive support and supervision program including elder counseling and spiritual and cultural awareness activities designed to strengthen the ties of at-risk youth with their home communities
- The Aboriginal Policy Framework was released to improve living standards for Aboriginal people in Alberta through increased Aboriginal participation in the economy, and to clarify government roles and responsibilities as they relate to Aboriginal peoples
- Over 200 Aboriginal youth attended a Youth Forum in Edmonton to discuss issues including substance abuse and violence
- The Native Services Traditional Mediation Circle was implemented
- An agreement in principle was signed with the Blood Tribe, leading to the tribe having its own governing legislation. This is the first agreement of its kind in Canada
- Joint planning and action was taken through the Alberta Metis Framework Agreement to address the needs of Metis children
- Youth leadership development programs in Aboriginal communities were initiated.

"Learn tolerance towards children, youth, disabled, different ethnic backgrounds and everyone will see the difference." – Children's Forum participant

Actively Lead in Health and Wellness Promotion

Forum participants recognized the importance of the healthy development of children including nutritional requirements, the need for comprehensive mental health services and increased awareness of sexual health issues.

In the last year:

- Alberta Justice enhanced mental health services for young offenders to ensure timely assessment and treatment
- A new coordinated provincial program was introduced to assist youth and adults in combatting the chronic and debilitating effects of the eating disorders anorexia nervosa and bulimia
- Funds were allocated for the development of regional programs for children's mental health services
- The Alberta Tobacco Reduction Alliance initiated a number of programs to reduce youth tobacco consumption
- Hepatitis B and meningococcal immunization campaigns were initiated
- A new children's hospital in Calgary was announced
- Suicide prevention programs for teens were implemented
- Supports were provided for youth apprehended under the ***Protection of Children Involved in Prostitution Act.*** Amendments to strengthen the Act were passed to provide additional support in the recovery process.

Create Alternatives in the Youth Justice System

Discussion at the forum on Alberta's justice system for youth centered on a need to move to a more restorative approach that focuses equally on rehabilitation and treatment for victims, offenders, family members and others in the community.

In the last year, the government has:

- Established Youth Justice Committees in communities across the province that work to resolve legal conflicts through alternative measures, community service work and meeting with victims and community members
- Heard over 3,000 cases before the new Calgary Domestic Violence Court which deals with domestic violence cases in a more timely manner and helps families in crisis, including children, get the help they need
- Established Youth Attendance Centres in Calgary and Edmonton to provide supervision and intervention for higher-risk youth on temporary or conditional release or on probation.

"Stop punishing. Stop sending young offenders to jail. Focus on healing."
– Children's Forum participant

Support Low-Income Families

Forum participants identified that strategies are required to support low-income families.

In the last year, the government has:

- Provided premium-free health coverage for 58,000 children in low-income families; this is 2,500 more children than last year due to increased eligibility levels
- Provided higher annual allowances to parents of 23,000 school-aged children in families receiving Supports For Independence for their children's school costs
- Increased basic and spousal exemptions to $12,900
- Removed 200,000 low-income Albertans from provincial tax rolls effective 2001
- Reduced the difference in tax burden between one and two-income families
- Provided payments of up to $1,000 per family through the Alberta Family Employment Tax Credit Program to over 320,000 children in 162,000 low and middle-income working families
- Provided an average monthly day care subsidy of $349 to benefit 12,300 children
- Reduced the amount of education property taxes the government collects by $135 million.

"Financially support stay-at-home parents."
– Children's Forum participant

Improve Advocacy for Children In Care

Children's Forum participants recommended the government review the mandate of the Children's Advocate to ensure the purpose of the office is still valid and that concerns are being addressed.

In the last year, the government has:

- Reviewed the mandate of the Office of the Children's Advocate to examine issues including expanding the role for the Advocate, improved advocacy services for Aboriginal children and enhanced natural advocacy
- Initiated further discussion and examination of the recommendations made in the Children's Advocate review report.

Measure Progress and Success

Forum participants reaffirmed Alberta's goal that all children will be healthy, safe, well cared-for, and successful at learning.

In the last year, the government has:

- Created performance measures that reveal how the overall goal is being met
- Developed business plans that focus on securing a healthy and safe future for our children
- Developed an instrument that recognizes a holistic approach to monitoring and evaluating First Nation agency programs within the Calgary region
- Undertaken a review of child welfare caseload growth
- Established policies for service evaluation, monitoring and program delivery through the Children's Services Ministry
- Established a performance measures working group with representation from all 18 Child and Family Services Authorities.

Next Steps

While much has been done for Alberta's children and youth since the forum, more work remains. We have clearly heard from Albertans that all decisions should be determined first and foremost by asking what is in the best interest of children, and that principle has been adopted into our planning process.

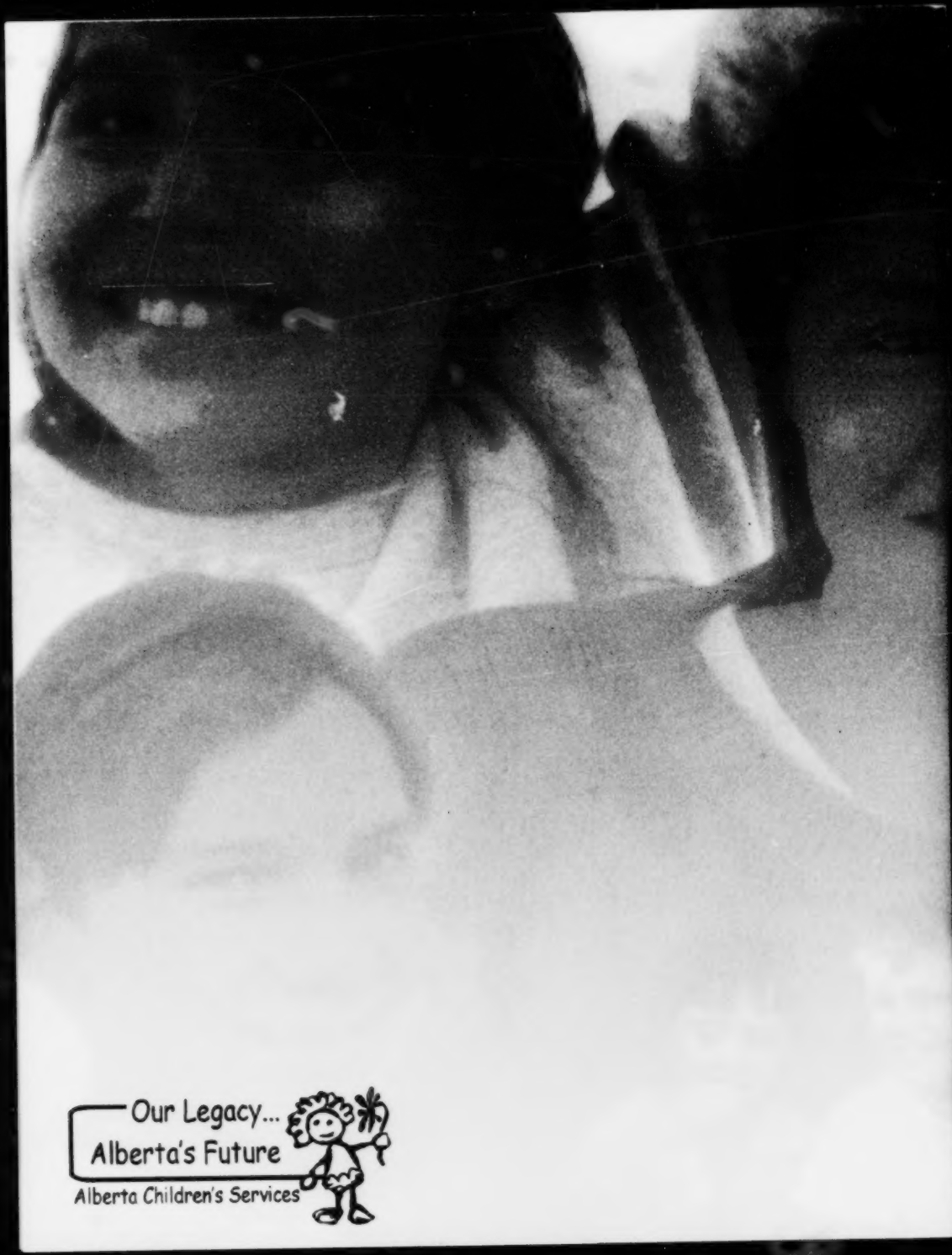
We will continue listening to Albertans. A second Children's Forum is being planned for fall 2001 where government will sit down at the table with those concerned about children to listen to their ideas and concerns.

We are committed to tracking the progress of the recommendations from the Children's Forum and Task Force on Children at Risk. The recommendations will be incorporated into ministries' business plans to identify new directions and new actions for our children and youth.

We will continue working with our partners across government to implement new services for children and youth through the Alberta Children's Initiative. The initiative, which now includes a youth focus, is one of four top cross-ministry priorities for the Alberta government. Partners include:

- Children's Services Minister Iris Evans and Deputy Minister Paula Tyler
- Community Development Minister Stan Woloshyn and Deputy Minister Donald Ford
- Health and Wellness Minister Gary Mar, Associate Minister Gene Zwozdesky and Deputy Minister Shelly Ewart-Johnson
- Human Resources and Employment Minister Clint Dunford and Deputy Minister Ron Hicks
- International and Intergovernmental Relations Minister Shirley McClellan, Associate Minister Pearl Calahasen and Deputy Minister Gerry Bourdeau
- Justice Minister and Attorney General Dave Hancock and Deputy Minister Paul Bourque
- Learning Minister Lyle Oberg and Deputy Minister Maria David-Evans
- Youth Secretariat Chair MLA Gary Severtson.

Additional information on programs and services for Alberta children and families through partnering ministries can be found at www.gov.ab.ca.


Our Legacy...
Alberta's Future
Alberta Children's Services